

Rural Development Sub-committee

RDC(3)-09-08: 4 June 2008

Powys Community Schools Action written submission to inquiry into provision of education in rural Wales and reorganisation of rural schools in Wales

We greatly welcome this inquiry and the opportunity to contribute to it.

About Our Evidence

This document summarises our viewpoint, some aspects of which have been expressed in greater detail in our original submission to the Petitions Committee and in our subsequent correspondence with, and verbal evidence to, that committee. We refer members of the Rural Development Sub-committee to those papers. We anticipate corroborating evidence being submitted by Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, the National Association for Small Schools, and the Association of Communities in Wales with Small Schools.

Our Interest and Aims

Our interest in these issues stems from our observation of primary school reorganisation developing in Powys and elsewhere in a haphazard way that is damaging communities and their children. In our experience, WAG guidance has been found wanting in terms of breadth and clarity and has not been taken seriously either by local authorities or by WAG itself. The result has been an unhelpful approach with WAG and councils blaming each other for the 'necessity' to close community schools. For the lack of clear guidance, robustly applied, communities across Wales are facing the loss of their most treasured asset: the one facility which most represents the community's vigour and future.

We therefore seek to achieve:

A recognition of the value of community schools, leading to;

Stronger leadership from WAG, providing a vision for our rural areas and appropriate and effective guidance to local authorities, leading to;

A clear framework in which all stakeholders - including local authorities, individual schools and communities, and Estyn - know where they stand and can cooperate effectively to the benefit of all.

We value the present inquiry as a very important step along this route.

Summary of arguments

Our principal arguments - which in the following pages are developed a little, but by no means fully - are:

1. That there is a great deal of evidence of the benefits of community schools;
2. Conversely, that there is little or no credible evidence favouring systematic closure of such schools;
3. That such closures are detrimental to children, families and communities;
4. That a proper, national, 'joined-up' Rural Education Policy, which would treat community schools as local assets - not liabilities - is the best way forward for all.

As appendices, we also provide a summary of an academic critique of the 'Reynolds Report' and specific evidence concerning the role of Estyn in encouraging school closures in Powys.

Evidence of the Benefits of Community Schools

Results

In Wales, the best results at A Level and beyond tend to come from those areas with the highest proportion of small schools. We don't think that this is coincidental.

Studies

Studies from a number of countries have demonstrated the educational advantages of small schools working closely with families and the community. They also demonstrate a positive impact on children from deprived backgrounds.

Anecdotal Evidence

There is a vast wealth of anecdotal evidence of the benefits to both children and the community arising from education within the

community. Almost any parent or teacher with experience of such an environment can recount experiences indicating how children educated in community schools (and typically in multi-age classes) behave better, are more tolerant and mature, and make fewer demands on expensive ALN (formerly SEN) provision. Conversely, one does not hear anecdotal evidence of the advantages of area schools.

Self-Evident Benefits

Some benefits of community schools are surely self-evident without the need for sophisticated academic research:

For a young child, the transition to a small local school is much easier than to a large distant one, thereby encouraging a positive attitude towards school from the outset;

In a small school, every child is able to participate fully in every activity, from school concerts, competitions and sports events to feeding the lambs at the local farm;

Security, in all senses, is enhanced in an environment where everyone knows everyone else;

Relationships between parents and staff are bound to be better when they meet informally every day and there is evidence that close working between teachers and families has a strong influence on pupils' achievement;

A child being taught within his or her own community will learn the meaning and value of community and respect for it.

The Arguments Made to Support Closures

Financial

Whether stated openly or not, the argument for closure is inevitably financial, despite ministerial assurances that educational establishments can only be closed on educational grounds. Other factors are often brought in to mask the underlying yearning to reap economies of scale; to treat young people as mere units in a consumer economy.

Even the purely financial argument is suspect, since studies have shown that, in practice, local authorities reap only a very small proportion of the savings enthusiastically predicted - and these are mainly studies conducted before the recent massive increases in transport costs. A French study in 1999 considered a group of 28 schools federated out of 50 and found that not only had the cost of transport almost overtaken the cost of keeping the original 50 schools open, but that results were poorer from the federated schools: a sad case of lose-lose.

Bigger is Better?

Councils sometimes argue that larger schools with bigger and better facilities are educationally superior. However, "There is no direct link between how well pupils do and the size of the school they attend." One could not ask for a clearer, more authoritative statement than that by Estyn ("Transforming Schools," "2007). Bigger is not better. Furthermore, studies have shown that within very broad limits, the age and condition of buildings has negligible impact on attainment. Experience has also shown that new buildings often fail to deliver in terms of flexibility, sustainability and lifetime cost.

Surplus Capacity

'Surplus capacity' is a frequent driver for closures, and local authorities - with some justice, in this instance - point to the pressure placed upon them directly and indirectly by WAG and Estyn to reduce this figure; a figure which is arrived at by applying a complex formula supplied by WAG for measuring the theoretical teaching capacity of a building. From this has derived much emotive talk about the cost of 'empty desks'. In fact, an empty desk costs next to nothing; what drives up the cost per pupil figure in small schools is simply the unavoidable cost of salaries of a minimum (usually) of two teachers. Reducing the physical size of a building, if practical, would eliminate surplus capacity without altering the cost, making it an unhelpful criterion which merely serves to cloud the issue.

The Reynolds Report

The so-called 'Reynolds Report' is interesting. It appears that a prestigious figure was given a sum of money to seek out 'counter-intuitive' evidence about the benefits of closing small schools, to support the ambitions of two local authorities in that direction. It is very significant that all the 'evidence' he could find was of such poor quality and quantity that the report has been widely discredited both by those in the educational field and by independent academics (see Appendix 1). To us, therefore, the report achieves precisely the opposite to what was intended: there "are no" good reasons for closing schools that are functioning well and serving the communities to which they belong.

The Impact of Closure

The Minister said it

Don't take our word for it: "Closing a village school can be a death-blow to the community." So said schools minister Stephen Byers in 1998.

The People Say It

Local people invariably see the school as a vital part of the community and are fiercely protective of it. It is noticeable that when a closure is threatened it is not simply the parents that protest, but also those without such a visible vested interest. Indeed, the records of consultations show that it is often the ordinary community members who voice the most balanced defence of 'their' schools.

Degenerating, Ageing Communities

Rural communities have already lost many of their services and facilities: stations, pubs, shops and businesses have closed and Post Offices stand next in line. Very often the school is the last remaining focal point and once that has gone it is very hard for a community to avoid degenerating into simply a collection of houses where people go home to sleep. Without a school there is no reason for families with young children (and these are often the economically active people) to move in or stay, so the population will tend to age, exacerbating demographic trends and placing ever greater burdens on care services.

The Evils of Bussing

Closing a school inevitably means bussing children around the countryside, a practice which is not a solution but a series of problems in its own right:

It brings out the worst in many children, to the detriment of all;

It is a poor and unhealthy substitute for walking or cycling;

It prevents participation in before- and after-school activity;

It removes parents' informal contacts with each other and with the school;

It is disrespectful to treat young children as a raw material to be carted round the country;

It flies in the face of the principles of sustainability;

Quite apart from its social and environmental cost, it now incurs a high financial cost.

Towards a Rural Education Policy

More Than Just a Building

Modern thinkers are questioning the concept of a school as being merely a building. Similarly, education is about more than children sitting in front of teachers: at least, it is if we want children to learn not just how to pass exams, but how to be good citizens. Good education takes place within a wider context which is both important and complex: the community.

Schools Are Assets

Communities have assets which are tangible and intangible, and the school is generally an example of both. The building itself, especially if traditional, is more often seen as a problem than an opportunity, yet there is scope for much more imagination in both use and funding (and we would particularly commend to the committee members the ideas of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg in this respect).

Inter-connectedness

The rural communities which give character to most of Wales, geographically speaking, are places where a number of issues inter-relate: family life, housing, jobs and businesses, services, transport, environmental sustainability, behaviour and crime ... and education. The degree of inter-connectedness is very strong and considering any one issue in isolation is fraught with danger.

A Rural Education Policy

We therefore seek the development and adoption of a Rural Education Policy and it is our earnest hope that the committee will recommend that further work be undertaken to this end. Such a policy would be the result of genuine joined-up thinking across departmental boundaries.

A Rural Education Policy would provide a clear framework, with the interests of rural communities at its heart, which would:

Articulate an overall vision for Wales' rural communities;

Treat the community school as a valued asset in terms of both its building and its ethos;

Promote sustainability (in the environmental and ethical sense) within educational provision;

Foster and build upon the links which already exist between schools, families, older people and other aspects of community life;

Link rural education with related issues such as housing, employment and transport;

Set out the criteria for making difficult choices when the costs appear to be outweighing the benefits;

Ensure a common understanding and cooperation between all the stakeholders - Estyn, county and community councils, individual schools and parents;

Give local authorities clear guidelines to enable them (and, indeed, require them) to plan education provision in a measured and strategic way;

Free schools from the need to continually defend themselves, so that they can get on with the job they do best.

Meanwhile ...

The development of a Rural Education Policy will not happen overnight. Meanwhile, therefore, there is scope for interim measures which we hope that the committee will press for:

Investigation of alternative ways of funding school buildings, as community resources;

Strengthening of existing WAG guidance to reflect more of a commitment to community schools (ideally, of course, including a presumption against their closure) together with a much more critical assessment being made of local authorities' reorganisation methods;

Seeking avenues towards a more constructive relationship between WAG and local authorities aimed at promoting best practice;

Encouraging Estyn to concentrate on matters directly affecting educational standards and to avoid tactics likely to lead to outcomes contrary to communities' interests (see Appendix 2).

Conclusion

We have argued that:

Community schools are an asset, in all senses;

The cases made for closure are almost always seriously flawed;

That closure of a community's school must have an impact, and that impact can only be negative;

A Rural Education Policy would provide a clear framework which would benefit all, and;

The present inquiry is a very valuable step towards this.

Not a Problem, Part of the Solution

In summary, we urge WAG to take the lead in seeing small schools not as a problem but as part of the solution. Community schools are already delivering:

Small classes;

Personal attention;

Local and global citizenship;

A relative absence of problems of drugs, bullying, exclusions and truancy;

Community viability;

Promotion of Welsh language and culture;

Local service delivery as a plank of sustainability.

Why throw away something that's already working well? Why discard a model which works in favour of importing a model from the cities which, very often, doesn't work?

Appendix 1: Academic Rebuttal of the 'Reynolds Report'

The report 'Small School Closure in Wales: New Evidence' (IWA, 2007) has been widely criticised for its bias and poor methodology. A strong academic rebuttal has been made by Professor Ray Pahl and Dr Liz Spencer from Essex University. In summary, they are extremely critical of:

The way the samples of schools and respondents were selected and lack of sampling rationale;

The inadequacy of the interview schedules, with major flaws in the questions asked;

Major flaws in the ways that the data were analysed;

Conclusions drawn which are not supported by the evidence.

Dr Spencer concludes with the following comments:

"This is one of the most amateur, ill-conceived, and thoroughly bad pieces of research I have seen in a long time. There is a worrying trend for consultants to carry out case studies, which seems to be used as an excuse for conducting poor quality quantitative and poor quality qualitative research. Of course, case studies don't usually allow the selection of large random samples, but there is no excuse for sloppy questions and analysis. Also, the strength of case studies is the detailed contextual information about each case, without which there is little scope for generalisation.

"I think the person carrying out the empirical research has little grasp of good research practice - be it qualitative or quantitative. If this is the kind of evidence used in evidence-based policy, heaven help us!"

Appendix 2: The Role of Estyn

Within the scope of its inquiry the committee has included as a very specific issue the role of Estyn. We are certainly able to offer evidence about the impact of the Estyn inspection of Powys LEA early in 2007. Because of the specific nature of this, and because it sits uneasily with the rest of our evidence, we have confined it to this appendix.

The Petitions Committee has already written to Estyn as a result of the evidence presented to them, and has received a carefully worded response which is no doubt available to members of the Rural Development Sub-committee.

The facts are very simple. During the inspection attention was drawn to the number of surplus places in Powys. According to one councillor, the inspector "pushed it quite hard." Towards the end of the inspection, at a closed session, the council board agreed on a plan to close the six smallest schools in the county. This plan came as a complete surprise to all, as it was not seen to follow from the council's adopted Policy for the Organisation of Primary Schools nor from its previous activities in implementing that policy. Several councillors have described how the inspector attended the closed session, clipboard in hand, and they have stated that his presence influenced the voting. One quote was, "I wasn't going to die in a ditch over that, especially with the Estyn inspector in the room." In other words, it would have taken a very brave councillor to vote against a plan which the Estyn inspector clearly favoured (and subsequently praised publicly in a local newspaper). Furthermore, it is widely understood (and this too has been confirmed by councillors) that the plan itself was hastily drawn up in order to demonstrate to the inspector that the council was willing and able to tackle the problem, presumably in the hope of influencing the grading in the final report.

There is no doubt whatever that Estyn did influence the council, and that two schools are closing this term as a direct result, with four more seriously threatened. Whether the influence was intentional is another matter, neither provable nor relevant. Estyn has denied putting direct pressure on local authorities and challenging that statement is unlikely to be fruitful. However, Estyn does not seem to understand or take responsibility for the effect that its mere presence has had. Estyn cannot be naive enough to believe that an inspector with a clipboard has no impact on those he is inspecting. Any teacher would quickly dismiss that idea. But there is a profound difference between the inspection of a school and an LEA: in the former case the worst that (usually) happens is a lot of stress, which dissipates as soon as the inspection is over; in the latter case, as we have seen, the inspection process can influence decisions with far-reaching consequences for children, parents and communities. This is not acceptable as a way of developing educational policy, and what continues to surprise us is that the inspector should apparently enthuse over such a poorly thought-out plan (and just how poorly thought-out it was became apparent during the consultation process).

Our own conclusion is that the Estyn inspector acted in an irresponsible way. However, it is our view that a large part of the problem stemmed from the emphasis given by WAG (and duly picked up by Estyn) to dealing with surplus places, coupled with the weakness of WAG guidance on "how" to deal with them. Our preferred approach therefore is not to attack Estyn (although we feel that they should be encouraged to think again, and a little more deeply, about what happened in Powys) but rather to strengthen the guidelines within which everyone is operating.